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Lebanon: Confessionalism— A Potent Force

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An Intelligence Assessment

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**NESA 82-10438
August 1982**

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This assessment was prepared by
and of the Office of Near East–
South Asia Analysis. It was coordinated with the
National Intelligence Council and the Directorate of
Operations. Comments and queries are welcome
and may be addressed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli
Division, NESA, on

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Key Judgments

The massive Israeli invasion will alter the political complexion of Lebanon in ways that are not yet clear. The outcome will be strongly influenced, however, by sectarian ties which, despite nearly 40 years of statehood, remain the dominant force in Lebanon. These ties have been reinforced by the confessional system under which the Lebanese have been governed for generations. Although designed to minimize sectarian strife by apportioning power and prerogatives among the main sects, the system has discouraged the development of political forces cutting across sectarian lines.

The system has periodically come under intense strain in recent decades. Internal problems, particularly the feeling among Muslims that their interests were not adequately represented in the power structure, have usually been the root of the trouble. But factors such as the Arab-Israeli dispute and Jordan's expulsion of the Palestinians in 1970-71 aggravated the internal differences.

In the 1975-76 civil war the system broke down completely, and the authority of the central government has never been fully restored. The strife brought into Lebanese politics a new generation of leaders who seem less inclined to accept the rules of political compromise that the country's founding generation considered essential to the working of the system.

The decline of Lebanon's formal institutions has encouraged the Lebanese to strengthen their confessional ties. The Maronites increasingly look to the Phalange, the Druze to the Junblat family, and the Shia to Amal and to their Imams for their social and security needs rather than to the government.

The increasing role in Lebanese politics of outside actors—the Syrians, the Palestinians, and the Israelis—has added another complicating dimension to the problems of confessionalism. Through their ties with Lebanese factional clients, these outside elements have been able to manipulate sectarian differences and advance their own interests. While the PLO at

*Information available as of 28 July 1982
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

least temporarily seems to have been largely removed from the equation, the influence of Israel and Syria will persist even if both withdraw their forces from Lebanon.

While a growing number of Lebanese have become opposed to the concept of confessionalism, we believe some form of government in which the various sects are represented on a proportional basis remains the only workable alternative for Lebanon in the near future. There is no secular, nationalist alternative and no one faction or sect—even the Phalange—strong enough to prevail over the others, unless it is imposed by an outside power.

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